



Influenza cases hit an all-time low in Australia in 2021 — that could be a problem when it returns

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Fewer Australians battled the flu in 2021 — but the common cold still circulated.

(Pexels: Andrea Piacquadio)

If you have been thinking the flu has virtually disappeared from our lives, you are not wrong.

Before COVID-19 arrived, the number of influenza cases was reaching some of its highest levels, with 313,033 notifications of laboratory-confirmed influenza across Australia in 2019 — 2.7 times higher than the five-year average — and 953 deaths.

In 2020, there were more than 20,000 notifications to the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS) and 37 deaths.

This year, to August 29, just 484 cases were recorded and zero deaths.

Key points:

- Experts say we have never, and probably will never see such low cases of the flu again
- Researchers say the flu will return when international borders reopen, but how severe is unknown
- Doctors say the flu vaccine is still our best protection against a future outbreak

Perhaps surprisingly, almost half of those were in Queensland, with 235 cases, but experts do not have an answer as to why.

Victoria recorded just 75 cases, New South Wales recorded 61 and the next highest was just 31 in the Northern Territory.

WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza's deputy director, Professor Ian Barr, said the majority of the cases were detected in quarantine, coming in from overseas, particularly from India.

"They have been having ongoing influenza circulation for the last three or four months," he said.

"It's not surprising we're picking up a few coming from quarantine."

Mal Grieg, from the Windsor Bowls Club, says no-one talks about the flu anymore. (*ABC News: Mark Leonardi*)

Mal Greig is the treasurer of the Windsor Bowls Club — a place normally impacted by severe influenza seasons — and said the flu was a "non-existent issue" this year.

"The flu used to impact the club and attendances at the club quite dramatically," Mr Greig said.

Now, he said, it was not even spoken about.

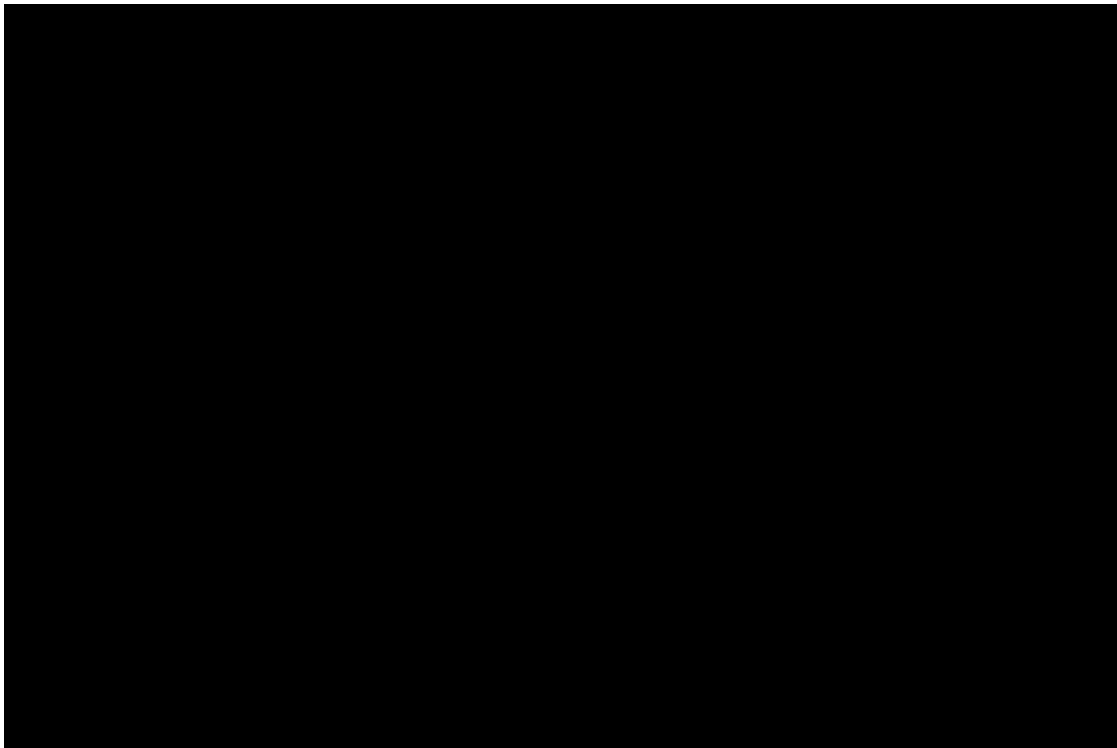
What happened to the flu?

Professor Barr said Australia was in "uncharted territory".

"The whole influenza world is topsy-turvy at the moment," he said.

"This is the time we should be seeing not a few hundred, a few thousands cases per state, with tens of thousands of cases overall throughout Australia.

"We've never seen figures this low ever before."



Social distancing has helped reduce the circulation of the flu. (ABC News: Dean Faulkner)

He said the fewer-than-usual cases was not just a phenomenon of 2021, it had also occurred last year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As soon as COVID restrictions were enforced, and international borders were closed ... last year, we saw a dramatic tail-off in influenza cases," he said.

Professor Barr said the closure of schools — normally a "hot bed for influenza activity" — also played a part in the low number of cases.

"All those measures have contributed to the lack of influenza circulating over the last two years," he said.

Dr Kirsty Short says we're not seeing any cases from the northern hemisphere, as we do normally. *(Supplied: University of Queensland)*

University of Queensland virologist Dr Kirsty Short said the main reason behind the low circulation of flu was the closure of international borders.

"It's been a really incredible situation where we've seen flu basically disappear," she said.

"So we're not having new flu viruses coming from the Northern Hemisphere into the Southern Hemisphere and then triggering a localised outbreak.

"It's been a really bizarre situation not to see any flu in our community."

Month	Flu cases 2019	Flu cases 2020	Flu cases 2021
Jan	6,829	6,982	55
Feb	7,161	7,174	50

Month	Flu cases 2019	Flu cases 2020	Flu cases 2021
Mar	11,158	5,899	62
Apr	18,667	309	68
May	30,372	231	75
Jun	5,7842	224	73
Jul	70,151	190	52
Aug	60,964	126	1*

*Cases for 2021 recorded in Australia until August 9. Source: [Immunisation Coalition](#)

Other viruses circulating

If you've experienced flu-like symptoms this winter, and were not positive with COVID-19, it was possible you had one of a range of other respiratory illnesses.

Dr Short said that flu surveillance in Australia was "incredibly good" so it was unlikely there was a surge of undetected flu cases.

"What we have seen is that the social distancing measures and these hygiene measures, restriction on borders, isn't effective [for] all respiratory viruses," she said.

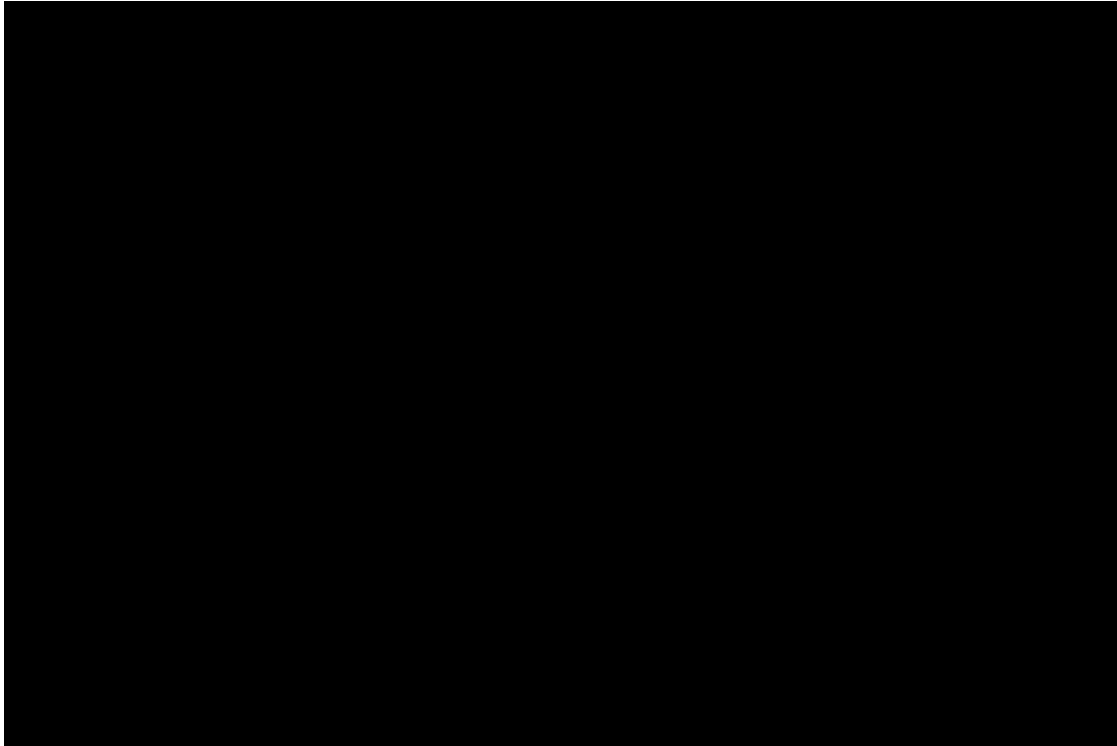
"For example, we're seeing rhinovirus — which [causes] the common cold — causing outbreaks and we're also seeing RSV, which is a virus of particular concern in kids.

"So it's not a universal protection against all respiratory viruses but it has seemed to have had an effect on the flu."

Dr Kirsty Short says other respiratory illnesses have still been circulating. (*Supplied: University of Queensland*)

Dr Short said that could simply be because the flu was much more susceptible to being broken down, compared to the much more "heartier" virus of the common cold.

"So, it could be one possible explanation: that all the measures we're taking to protect ourselves against COVID are working against the flu virus, but they're not working against heartier viruses like the common cold virus."



Dr Maria Boulton says GPs have still been busier than ever, due to mental illness from COVID and other respiratory illnesses. (*ABC News: Mark Leonardi*)

Brisbane general practitioner Dr Maria Boulton said that, while it had been a noticeably mild flu season, GPs were "busier than ever".

"We've seen a lot more presentations with things like mental health issues, there's been a huge spike in that because of the pandemic," she said.

"And we're also seeing families present with other respiratory viruses [including adenovirus and parainfluenza virus]."

Will the flu return?

Professor Barr said "it will come back for sure", when international borders reopen.

"What we don't know is the timing of that and how quarantine is going to open up, whether there's going to be some level of quarantine, home quarantine, or something like that," he said.

"Which may ameliorate major outbreaks ... but I think this is golden times for a lack of influenza. I don't think we'll see these times ever again."



Dr Kirsty Short says the flu vaccine is the best protection against future outbreaks. (ABC News: Mark Leonardi)

Dr Short said the concern was that because we have had a few seasons, without the natural boost to our immunity that seasonal flu provides, we will be more susceptible to the virus in the future.

"So maybe we're going into a severe flu outbreak," she said.

"The optimistic side is because we haven't had much flu circulating, maybe the virus hasn't mutated so much, so that our past vaccines will still provide good protection.

"The reality is, we don't know and it really could go either way."

She said researchers were going to be carefully watching the upcoming winter season in the northern hemisphere, especially with more borders opening and travel occurring compared to last year.

"It's really difficult to say ... but it's definitely something we all need to be watching because the last thing we want is to have a bad flu season after going through everything with COVID."

A Brisbane GP clinic says it has still had a strong uptake of the flu vaccine. (*ABC News: Mark Leonardi*)

Professor Barr said RSV has been a good lesson in how quickly a virus can reappear.

He said it was almost non-existent in 2020 before Sydney experienced a large outbreak in October, followed by another surge in cases in Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland.

"And they were in summer, which is quite unusual for RSV. Normally it's a very winter-bound disease, so it shows you how quickly these respiratory viruses, which are not there one minute, then they're back the next and they can cause severe outbreaks even in the middle of summer," Professor Barr said.

What about the flu vaccine?

Professor Barr said there has also been a reduction in flu vaccination uptake this year, with just 33.3 per cent of Australians getting the jab.

However, about 80 per cent of those over 65 are vaccinated.

About 33 per cent of the community has had the flu vaccination so far this year. (ABC News: Mark Leonardi)

The low number of cases has made developing new vaccines difficult.

"Let's just say it's been tricky," Professor Barr said.

"Normally we have a very good influx on samples from not just Australia, but New Zealand and other surrounding countries so we've been scratching around for samples in the last 18 months.

"It's an interesting time, because we've never seen the virus under this sort of pressure before."

How can we prepare for return of the flu?

Professor Barr said many lessons learned from COVID-19 could be applied to influenza.

"Hopefully we don't have to resort to severe responses," he said.

"We do have influenza vaccines, and we do have drugs against influenza as well."

He said things like masks, social distancing and quarantining have obviously impacted circulation of the flu.

"So there's no reason why we couldn't introduce at least some of those in a severe influenza season," he said.

Dr Boulton said she has still seen a strong uptake of the flu vaccine at her clinic, and recommended people keep that in mind for when the flu makes a comeback.